

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 11
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
I thought it was easy
—Luke 13:22-30

I thought it was easy. Salvation is a gift from God. There is nothing I can do to make God love me more than he already does. There is nothing I can do to make God forgive me more than he already has. Jesus is my Savior. He has done it all. He washed away my sins in the blood he shed for me on the cross. He broke the shackles of death when he rose again from the dead on Easter Sunday. And now all of this free forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation with God, eternal life, God gives it to me and to you as a free gift. I don't have to earn it. I don't have to score points with God to get it. The Bible says, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God—not by works—so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). What could be easier?

But wait a second, if getting to heaven is a cakewalk, then why does Scripture give us so many warnings and cautions and encouragements? If salvation is so easy, why would Peter the apostle say, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, where will the ungodly sinner end up?" (1 Peter 4:18)? If salvation is so easy, why does the Apostle Paul say, "I beat my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:27)? If salvation is so easy, why does Jesus tell us, "Narrow is the road and difficult is the path that leads to life, and only a few people find it" (Matthew 7:14)? If salvation is so easy, why does Jesus tell us today, "Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able"? On the one hand, Jesus tells us, "Your sins are forgiven, your ticket to heaven has already been punched and paid for, eternal life is yours." On the other hand, Jesus warns us and encourages us, "Watch out! Stay alert! Strive!" What's going on?

Well, picture this scenario: Out of the blue you learn that you have received an amazing inheritance. You are handed a briefcase containing one million dollars in cold, hard cash. You are handed a valuable ring and a beautiful gold watch. Now, with these valuable items in your possession, you are going to walk home. Just an easy walk home! But to get home you are going to have to walk through the worst neighborhood in the city carrying all of this wealth. You say, "Isn't that dangerous?" And the answer is, "Yes, it's very dangerous. You will meet people who would mug you and kill you for a dollar, let alone for a million. So don't stop, don't get distracted, keep your eyes on the goal of getting home, and don't let anyone rob you." I could add to the picture by saying, "Oh, and by the way, you're going to have to get past a gang of thugs that's going to be watching for you; they're going to do everything they can to take away what you've got." When word gets out that you're walking through the neighborhood, do you think that every force of darkness out there isn't going to try to waylay you and steal what you have?

This is by no means a perfect analogy, but as a Christian you have been freely given every gift of God's grace: Your sins are forgiven. You are a child of God. You are a member of God's royal family. The treasure of salvation has been freely placed into your hands. Now all that's left is to walk home. But you're not home in heaven just yet. You are still on this pilgrimage called life. You are a stranger and a pilgrim here, just passing through on the way to your heavenly home. Do you think that the enemies of your soul and the enemies of God aren't going to do everything in their power to try to strip you of what you've been given? Satan is going to hurl all his forces of evil at you to try to get you to stumble and fall. The world around you is going to do everything in its power to distract you and waylay you on your journey. And because you and I still have a sinful nature, the temptations and the struggles are even going to arise from within. We will battle sinful desires, laziness, complacency, lovelessness. We will fight with that sinful Old Adam inside us, and our old sinful nature will try to distract and derail us and disqualify us for the prize.

So you and I go through life with a target on our back. It's a struggle. The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Satan prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8). "Resist him," Peter says, "standing firm in the faith" (5:9).

Jesus tells us today, "*Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*" The narrow path that leads to life is a life of daily repentance. It is daily letting go of self, of pride, of any idea that God owes us something. It is recognizing that we depend completely on the mercy of God and the merits of Jesus. That daily repentance, daily turning from sin and turning to Jesus in faith for forgiveness, is so hard that it is impossible for us to do it ourselves. It's something that the Holy Spirit works in us. The narrow door to heaven is Jesus himself. There is no other way into the kingdom of God—only Jesus. All other efforts to get right with God through all other means fall short and fail. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

But on the path through this life there are deadly distractions. There may be the lure of wealth and prosperity that prompts someone to say, "I'll find time for you later, Jesus. Right now, I need to make some money." And Jesus gets put onto the back burner, and faith takes a back seat, and before you know it you're rolling in earthly wealth, but when

suddenly eternity calls you out of this life you stand in the judgment spiritually naked and destitute. Maybe you gained the world, but you lost your soul forever. There may be the call of friends or lovers luring us off the path to life. They're friends who say, "Leave that church stuff behind and come out and live a little." Sinful behavior beckons, and Jesus gets left behind. Or it might be a lover who seduces into temptation and immorality. Scripture is crystal clear: the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God. Repentance is lost, faith is out the window, we become comfortable in an immoral lifestyle, and the cheap pleasures of this life give way to an eternity of outer darkness. There may be clever teachers who speak with the voice of Satan himself, saying, "You still believe in those myths and fairy tales? What, do you still believe in the Easter bunny, too? C'mon, grow up! You don't need your parents' religion. Learn to think for yourself!" And it makes sense. It sounds so reasonable and attractive and much less burdensome than a difficult walk with Christ, and the enticing words chalk up another victim who stops listening to Jesus and ends up in eternal fire. Or maybe it's falling captive to emotion and feeling instead of holding onto sound teaching and solid truth. But it feels so good. It makes so much sense. It makes me happy. Jesus says, "Watch out for false teachers. Keep away from them." And we're tempted to say, "But I like the false teachers. They're so interesting and so dynamic and so relevant." But it's wrong. There's no life-giving gospel. It's deadly.

So what's God's answer for you? You're walking through the most dangerous neighborhood in the city, surrounded by hoodlums and thugs who want to destroy you spiritually and take your inheritance from you. How are you ever going to make it through this life safely in one piece? The answer is: Jesus will walk with you. You hold on tightly to your Savior, as he holds on tightly to you. In practical terms it means, you keep the Good News, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life front and center. You don't let anything take your eyes off that eternal goal.

There is a little sentence in our Gospel today that sets this in front of us. Luke tells us that Jesus went on his way from one town and village to another, teaching, and making his way to Jerusalem. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for one reason: He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, to spill his blood, and to give his life as the ransom for sinners. Keep that in front of you and don't ever forget it! Your God has loved you with an everlasting love. He has called you by name. You are his! Jesus left heaven above and the glory he had with his Father from before the world began, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary for one eternal purpose: So he could go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. And that is exactly what he did. Your Savior has forgiven your sins. He has given you the gift of eternal life. Fix your eyes on Jesus, who loves you and wants you to spend eternity with him. Strengthen your faith by hearing the sweet name of Christ crucified for you. Worship your God, hear his voice, celebrate his forgiveness.

The gospel of forgiveness refreshes and strengthens you for the journey. Along the way your Savior feeds you with his gospel of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. In Holy Communion Jesus gives us his true body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith, and he refreshes us along the path of life. Stay connected to Word and sacrament, and all the thugs and hoodlums and all the forces of hell itself will not be able to snatch you from Jesus' side and rob you of your inheritance.

I thought it was easy! Well, nobody ever said getting to heaven is easy. But with Jesus at our side, with Jesus going before us and behind us, with Jesus the object of our faith, with Jesus the one we cling to, the way to heaven may not be easy, but it's certain. Amen.